

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, Rhode Island

The Philippine Insurrection:
America's First Venture into
Military Operations Other Than War

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College, the Department of the Navy or the Department of Defense.

Signature: 

13 June 1997

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Chairman, Joint Military Operations Department


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Date

19970814 119

DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 1

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1. Report Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
2. Security Classification Authority:			
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:			
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.			
5. Name of Performing Organization: JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
6. Office Symbol:		7. Address: NAVAL WAR COLLEGE 686 CUSHING ROAD NEWPORT, RI 02841-1207	
8. Title (Include Security Classification): The Philippine Insurrection: America's First Venture into Military Operations Other Than War (U)			
9. Personal Authors: LTC Richard W. Mills, USA			
10. Type of Report: FINAL		11. Date of Report: 13 June 1997	
12. Page Count: 18 pages including End Notes.			
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.			
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: Military Operations Other Than War; MOOTW; Insurgency; Counterinsurgency; Philippines; Spanish-American War; Guerilla; Principles of MOOTW, Principles of War.			
15. Abstract: The Philippine Insurrection was America's venture into the realm of what we now know as Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). This conflict began as a declared war against Spain and ended as a fight to gain control of a nation in chaos. It provides a good case from which today's military and civilian leaders can learn significant lessons about planning and executing operations in MOOTW. Pertinent lessons can be derived by examining key issues and events using the principles of MOOTW, with particular attention on the principles of objective, legitimacy, security, and restraint. The preparation and conduct of this campaign exemplifies the difficulties involved in the development of national policies and the complications in executing those policies. This case also illustrates the interconnectivity of the six principles and the need to consider them as a whole and not independently. More significantly, it will demonstrate that the principle of objective is the cornerstone from which all the other principles are derived. Without sound, clear objectives it will be impossible, just as in the Philippines, to maintain a collective unity of effort, the perseverance necessary to win, or the legitimacy required for continued support. The ability of this nation's leadership to properly assess the critical issues within each of the principles of MOOTW will determine not only the magnitude but the intensity in which we will participate in these type of operations. Therefore, it is imperative that our leadership take every opportunity to study and learn from our past endeavors to ensure that our mistakes are not repeated at the cost of America's sons and daughters or her dignity.			
16. Distribution / Availability of Abstract:	Unclassified X	Same As Rpt	DTIC Users
17. Abstract Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
18. Name of Responsible Individual: CHAIRMAN, JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
19. Telephone: 841-6461		20. Office Symbol: C	

Abstract of

THE PHILIPPINE INSURRECTION : AMERICA'S FIRST VENTURE INTO MILITARY OPERATIONS OTHER THAN WAR

The Philippine Insurrection was America's first venture into the realm of what we now know as Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). This conflict began as a declared war against Spain and ended as a fight to gain control of a nation in chaos. It provides a good case from which today's military and civilian leaders can learn significant lessons about planning and executing operations in MOOTW. Pertinent lessons can be derived by examining key issues and events using the principles of MOOTW, with particular attention on the principles of objective, legitimacy, security, and restraint.

The preparation and conduct of this campaign exemplifies the difficulties involved in the development of national policies and the complications in executing those policies. This case also illustrates the interconnectivity of the six principles and the need to consider them as a whole and not independently. More significantly, it will demonstrate that the principle of objective is the cornerstone from which all the other principles are derived. Without sound, clear objectives it will be impossible, just as in the Philippines, to maintain a collective unity of effort, the perseverance necessary to win, or the legitimacy required for continued support.

The ability of this nation's leadership to properly assess the critical issues within each of the principles of MOOTW will determine not only the magnitude but the intensity in which we will participate in these type of operations. Therefore, it is imperative that our leadership take every opportunity to study and learn from our past endeavors to ensure that our mistakes are not repeated at the cost of America's sons and daughters or her dignity.

INTRODUCTION

The Philippine Insurrection was America's first venture into the realm of what we now know as Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). This conflict began as a declared war against a world power (Spain) and ended as a fight to gain control of a nation in chaos. The Philippine Insurrection provides a good case from which today's military and civilian leaders can learn significant lessons about how to plan and conduct operations in the realm of MOOTW. Pertinent lessons can be derived by examining key issues and events of this conflict using the principles of MOOTW, with particular attention on objective, legitimacy, security, and restraint.

BACKGROUND

On 23 April 1898, the United States declared war on Spain. This action was the result of the continued unrest in Cuba, which became increasingly dangerous to U.S. citizens there and the sinking of the "Maine". In an attempt to further tax the Spanish efforts in Cuba and help bring them to a more rapid settlement of peace, Commodore Dewey was ordered to Manila Bay to destroy the Spanish fleet located there. Dewey arrived in Manila Bay on the morning of 1 May and by noon the Spanish fleet and all batteries had been destroyed.

The War Department promptly authorized troops to be sent to the Philippines under the command of MG Wesley Merritt. Only one-fifth of these forces were from the regular Army, the rest were volunteer regiments. Despite the numerous problems that existed in almost all areas, the first of six expeditions departed on May 25, 1898. By the end of February 1899 the total number of troops in the Philippines had reached 25,000. Just before his departure from the U.S., MG Merritt was directed by President McKinley to:

“Go to the Philippines, cooperate with the Navy, defeat the Spanish armed forces there, establish order and the sovereignty of the United States. Advise the Filipinos that the United States aims to protect, not fight them; follow existing laws as far as possible; take over public property, the collection of taxes and customs; open the ports to commerce”¹

After the expeditions arrived in the Manila Bay, they began to move ashore at Cavite. The forces faced the problems of moving massive amounts of men, equipment, and material ashore with no port facilities and few boats capable of hauling large amounts of cargo.

The military situation in Manila at the end of June showed there were approximately 5,600 Spanish soldiers inside the walled city. The city was surrounded by Spanish trenches and block-houses as well as the Filipino insurgents. The estimated number of insurgents around Manila at this time was between 20,000 and 40,000, with approximately twice that number in the outlying provinces. The insurgent forces were poorly trained, extremely short of weapons and ammunition, and many of them were still fighting with bolos, bows and arrows.

It was some six weeks after Dewey’s success before sufficient forces were available to secure Manila without the assistance of the Filipinos. The capture of Manila was less difficult than expected, but still there were problems trying to keep the Filipinos from entering the city. Attempting to keep the Filipinos and Spanish separated became a significant source of friction between the Americans and the insurgents.

While both the Americans and the Filipinos waited for the outcome of the treaty negotiations in Paris, tensions continued to rise. On 4 February 1899 American sentries shot and killed three Filipino soldiers. What followed was a two and half year conflict that would

result in some 75,000 U.S. soldiers being deployed to the Philippines in order to defeat the Filipino guerrillas and gain control of the country.

OBJECTIVE *“Direct every military operation toward clearly defined, decisive, and attainable objectives.”²*

Understanding the strategic and operational aims of an operation are the cornerstone to achieving success in any operation. This is especially true when entering into Military Operations Other Than War. The political and military goals must be developed in concert with each other and they must be mutually supporting. The selection of a sound national objective is, therefore, the most important single decision of a war or campaign. The time to develop a national objective is not in the heat of battle, therefore it must be delineated prior to the commitment of military forces.³

When Admiral Dewey was ordered to sail to Manila he did so with little understanding of what awaited him. His only directive was, “War has been declared between the United States and Spain. Proceed at once to the Philippine Islands. Commence operations, particularly against the Spanish fleet. You must capture vessels or destroy. Use utmost endeavor”⁴ No other orders were received.

Likewise, when MG Merritt was directed to report to San Francisco and organize the expeditionary forces being formed there, he had only President McKinley’s letter of instruction to guide his planning. In an attempt to clarify this directive, he asked the President if it was his (the President’s) desire to subdue and hold all of the Spanish territory in the islands, or merely to seize and hold the capital - there was no reply. The President did

state that the expedition had the dual purpose of securing the reduction of Spanish power and giving order and security to the islands while under U.S. control. Additionally, the President told Merritt that he should maintain military occupation and acquaint the Filipinos with the benefits of American government; assure them that you are not there to make war on them, but to protect them and secure their rights. President McKinley's last instructions were that occupation should be accomplished with the least amount of severity possible but that Merritt's power was absolute, supreme, and immediate to operate upon the political condition of the inhabitants.⁵

The vague, open endedness of the United States' political and military objectives in the Philippines played a crucial part in the ferocity and duration of the fighting that was to follow the surrender of Spain. The lack of commitment as to the status of the newly established Philippine government and to the true intentions of the United States led the Filipinos to believe that they would gain independence under the protection of the U.S. Navy, the same as Cuba. This confusion was worsened by the actions, whether perceived or actual, of Consul General E. Spencer Pratt in Hong Kong, and Commander E. P. Wood, who intimated to General Alguinaldo, commander of the Philippine insurgent forces, that the United States had no designs on colonization or annexation of the Philippines.⁶

Had the President, his staff, Congress, and the military leadership collectively developed a comprehensive assessment of both the political and military environment within the Philippines, a more reasonable and coherent set of objectives could have been developed. If the Filipino desire for independence had been reasonably considered, a compromise could have been negotiated prior to the onset of hostilities. The unfortunate result of the United

States' poor development of objectives was an expensive and lengthy conflict which created significant turmoil within the population and political structure.

UNITY of EFFORT *"Seek unity of effort in every operation, ensuring all means are directed at a common effort."*⁷

In today's terms, unity of effort encompasses significantly more than during the American-Filipino conflict. Today, military leaders must consider all aspects of the operations to be conducted, as well as the influences of the media (both domestic and international), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private volunteer organizations (PVOs), and participation of other national military organizations on the ability to achieve their stated objectives. This reduces duplicity and the protection of scarce resources.

The unity of effort problems faced by MG Merritt, and later MG Otis, are not unique to the Philippine Insurrection. The primary areas where problems arose were in the coordination between the Army and Navy, between the Philippine insurgents (prior to the surrender of the Spanish forces), and between American operational commanders.

After the arrival of U.S. Army troops in Manila Bay, the challenge of transferring men, material, and equipment ashore was fraught with coordination and cooperation problems. The Army had to conduct these operations with little or no assistance from the Navy. These problems were exacerbated because virtually all coordination authority between the services was kept at the general officer level.

Arriving with the objectives outlined earlier, the American leadership failed to seize the opportunity to make the Filipinos their allies. Fear of looting, excessive reprisals, and the inability to control their soldiers were sound reasons for attempting to keep the Filipinos out

of the attack on Manila and out of the city until the peace treaty was finalized. Had Dewey and Merritt attempted to properly negotiate with Aguinaldo on the reason for the Filipinos to refrain from participating in the attack on Manila and the issue of the future of the Philippine government, it is possible the entire two plus years fighting might have been prevented.

Another area which continuously debilitated the overall success of operations was the inconsistency of the U.S. senior military leaders. Their inconsistencies ranged from failing to retain areas once they had been secured, demanding the strictest of compliance to directives, and being so cautious as to not allowing subordinate leaders to exploit advantages they may have gained. It would take three years to do a job that most of the subordinate leaders believed could have been accomplished in two months. A subordinate general officer might be sent out on a mission but he could not make a single move without direct authority from the Army headquarters in Manila. This type of control not only added to the confusion as to the true objectives of the campaign, it also forced the Army to fight long arduous battles to gain control of an area just to be told to abandon it and return to Manila.⁸

In late 1899, GEN Otis developed a plan to push into northern Luzon with a three pronged assault to cut off and capture Aguinaldo in an attempt to bring the fighting to a more rapid end. In this particular case, GEN Otis failed to give explicit guidance as to where the converging forces in the north were to link up in order to close the door on Aguinaldo's escape. In breaking with his normal method of too much control, he allowed for confusion between his subordinate commanders which resulted in a failure to successfully capture the guerrilla leader.⁹

To obtain unity of effort in all aspects of operations, commanders must not only be consistent in their guidance but also provide their intent in such a manner that subordinate commanders have the latitude to properly accomplish their assigned tasks within the rapidly changing environment of MOOTW.

SECURITY *“Never permit hostile factions to acquire a military, political, or informational advantage.”*¹⁰

This principle, if properly applied, allows the commander to maintain freedom of action by controlling the forces’ vulnerability to hostile acts, influence, or surprise. Security also applies to much more than just the protection of U.S. military forces and material. It also encompasses the protection and safeguarding of the local populous, the legitimate government, if one exists, and other non-military or non-governmental organizations which may be within our area of operations.¹¹

The commanders of the U.S. force in the Philippines struggled with the problems of security. The insurrection forces had no prescribed uniforms or equipment and therefore were extremely difficult to identify when they were not shooting at them. Their ability to attack an American unit, then hide their weapons, and just blend in with locals made it extremely hard to fight them effectively. The American’s inability or lack of resolve to secure areas as they were taken, allowed the Filipinos to maintain their freedom of action and thereby influence U.S. operations disproportionately.

RESTRAINT *“Apply appropriate military capability prudently.”¹²*

The misuse of force or inappropriate actions on the part of a military organization can and will undermine the successful outcome of any operation. Commanders must ensure that their soldiers understand the limitations under which they are expected to operate. Today this is accomplished primarily through the issuance of Rules of Engagement (ROE). Due to the constant changes in a MOOTW environment, ROE must continuously be reevaluated and revised to ensure the appropriate response will be applied in all situations.

The American forces did commit numerous atrocities during the operations in the Philippines. They involved mass retaliations, unreasonable incarceration, torture, and the unnecessary destruction of entire villages. The actions of GEN Bell, in southern Luzon, and GEN Smith, on island of Samar, during the latter part of the pacification efforts, are excellent examples of how commanders can become so deeply involved that they lose sight of the legitimate objectives of their operations. In an effort to control the native population, GEN Bell issued the following Circular Order No. 22:

“To combat such a population, it is necessary to make the state of war as insupportable as possible, and there is no more efficacious way of accomplishing this than by keeping the minds of the people in such a state of anxiety and apprehension that living under such conditions will soon become unbearable. Little should be said. The less the better. Let acts, not words, convey the intention.”¹³ (emphasis added by author)

Hundreds of people were herded into concentration type camps near villages under the control of the Army. Despite all efforts to maintain food supplies and sanitary conditions, it is estimated that some 11,000 men, women, and children died in these camps due to disease, starvation, and neglect.¹⁴

GEN Smith assumed a similar approach to controlling the insurgents on the Island of Samar. He ordered all natives to report to coastal towns and those that refused would be considered as active enemy. He insisted that neutrality not be tolerated by any native and that they demonstrate conclusively that they are a friend.¹⁵ He was even more direct and ruthless in his attempt to pacify the insurgents when he issued the following oral instruction:

“ ‘I want no prisoners. I wish to kill and burn: the more you kill and burn the better you will please me,’ and further, that he wanted all persons killed who were capable of bearing arms and in actual hostilities against the United States, and did in reply to a question by MAJ Waller asking for an age limit, designate the limit as ten years of age.”¹⁶

These particular examples are the extreme and many resulted in the officers and some of their subordinates being brought to trial after peace was secured. Despite the brutality of these campaigns they did achieve the desired endstate of bringing the organized resistance against the American forces to a more rapid end, but at a cost to the legitimacy and integrity of the United States that was unacceptable.

These actions also highlight the necessity for today’s leaders to constantly be aware of operations being conducted and that suitable care is being taken to ensure their intent and the ROE are compatible with the objectives set forth by the National Command Authority (NCA).

PERSEVERANCE *“Prepare for the measured, protracted application of military capability in support of strategic aims. Some MOOTW may require years to achieve the desired results”¹⁷*

Perseverance is one of the most difficult principles for both our military and civilians leaders to achieve. It requires that the nation be prepared to commit to the conduct of those

operations necessary for an extended period of time at the level of effort capable of achieving our national objective. The resolution required to maintain perseverance is influenced by both the foreign and domestic media, the international community at large, the will of the people of the United States to support the long term commitment, and by the will of the country in which the operations are being conducted. Most importantly it requires the total support of the national and military leadership which provide operational commanders the assets, funding, and guidance to successfully complete assigned missions.

During the Philippine Insurrection the President, Congress, and the War Department all continued to support the operations to seize control from the Spanish and to subsequently pacify the Filipinos. As they became available, additional troops and more modern equipment were sent to support the campaign.

The operations in the Philippines were not without dissenters in the United States. Many Congressmen and numerous Anti-Imperialist organizations were vehemently against the U.S. annexation of that country. Had President McKinley not been reelected in the 1900 presidential campaign, it is highly probable that the operations in the Philippines would have been terminated. Even earlier, the Congress passed acceptance of the Paris Peace Treaty by a margin of only one vote.

On the operational level of warfare, GEN Otis could be faulted for his over cautiousness and strict desire to control all operations from his headquarters in Manila, as was previously discussed. His reluctance to hold onto areas once they were taken did in all probability extend the fighting for a significant time.

The perseverance displayed by the Filipino insurgents was also significant. Though fettered by a severe lack of training, arms and ammunition, and the inability to fight the U.S. forces in large numbers, the insurrectos fought credibly for almost three years against a far superior adversary.

In considering our perseverance and resolve in conducting MOOTW today, it is essential that commanders not only evaluate their own requirements and abilities but they must also attempt to anticipate the perseverance of their adversaries. If we do not take full consideration of this aspect of operations we will fail to conduct a proper net assessment and subsequently fail to provide the essential guidance necessary for the attainment of our national objectives.

LEGITIMACY *“Committed forces must sustain the legitimacy of the operation and of the host government, where applicable.”¹⁸*

Arguably, the second most important or critical principle, legitimacy, like objective, is supported and derived from the other principles. Legitimacy must be considered in all aspects of unity of effort, security, restraint, perseverance and most importantly objective. If the actions of our forces or the host nation forces we are supporting are in any way perceived as immoral, unjust, bias to one particular party over another, or inconsistent then the credibility of our efforts will be lost. With the international community, the world press, and the American public only seconds away from everything we do, it is absolutely essential that every action taken be evaluated for its legitimacy prior to execution.

The legitimacy of U.S. actions in the Philippines was very difficult for many to understand. There appeared to be a significant inconsistency in the policies the U.S. applied

to the different countries at the conclusion of the Spanish - American War. Cuba, which was the source of the agitation that prompted our declaration of war against Spain, was basically left to self determination at the end of the fighting. The Philippines, some 7,000 miles away, was assumed to be incapable of self government, as such, the U.S. was willing to pay whatever price necessary to bring it under American rule. To many, it made little sense to try to govern a country so far away which appeared to possess no vital U.S. interests. Furthermore, the U.S. had never before sought nor held colonies anywhere in the world.

The unclear guidance and contradictory objectives, as discussed above, also added to the lack of legitimacy of U.S. operations during this time. The U.S. had gone to the Philippines to defeat the Spanish and to accomplish this task it would be necessary to gain the allegiance of the Filipinos. Yet Dewey and Merritt were told to make no recognition of a Filipino government or their right to self government once the Spanish were defeated. This type of inconsistency was reinforced by directives such as this to GEN Otis from President McKinley:

“ ‘(Tell the Filipinos)...that the mission of the United States is one of benevolent assimilation.’ Nevertheless, the ‘strong arm of the authority’ was to be maintained in order ‘to overcome all obstacles to the bestowal of the blessing of good and stable government.’”¹⁹

The blatant contradictions in guidance, objectives, and in the extremities to which the U.S. forces were directed to take, collectively contributed to undermining the legitimization of the U.S. occupation of the Philippines.

Inconsistencies in policy, poor or unclear guidance, and a failure to fully appreciate the implications of soldiers’ actions are even more critical today than they were during the

fight for the Philippines. The importance of maintaining the legitimacy of our actions can never be overstated, for without legitimacy all other principles of MOOTW are nullified.

CONCLUSION

The Philippine Insurrection provides an excellent venue for the study of the principles of Military Operations Other Than War. The preparation for and the conduct of this campaign exemplifies the extreme difficulties involved in the development of policies and the complications in executing those policies. Although only a small number of examples are discussed here, this case also illustrates the total interconnectivity of the six principles and the need to consider them as a whole and not as independent issues. As is seen herein, the principle of objective is the cornerstone from which all the other principles must be derived. Without sound, clear objectives, from the national to operational level, it will be impossible, just as in the Philippines, to maintain a collective unity of effort, the perseverance necessary to win, or the legitimacy required for continued support.

The nation's leadership, both military and civilian, are essential to the success or failure of MOOTW. Their ability to properly assess the critical issues within each of the principles will determine not only the magnitude, in terms of forces, but the intensity in which we will participate in these type of operations. Therefore it is imperative that our leadership take every opportunity to study and learn from our past endeavors to ensure that our mistakes are not repeated at the cost of American lives.

NOTES

¹ Letter of Instruction President McKinley sent to MG Merritt prior to Merritt's departure for the Philippines.

² Joint Pub 3-07, Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War, p. II-1

³ RADM C.R. Brown, "The Principles of War". pp. 624-625.

⁴ William T. Sexton, Soldiers in the Sun, p. 18

⁵ Brain M. Linn, The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899-1902, p. 2.

⁶ Henry F. Graff, American Imperialism and the Philippine Insurrection, p. X-XI.

⁷ Joint Pub 3-07, p. II-3.

⁸ Sexton, p. 121

⁹ Baclagon, pp. 114-121.

¹⁰ Joint Pub 3-07, p. II-3.

¹¹ Ibid. p. II-3-4.

¹² Joint Pub 3-07, p. II-4.

¹³ Moorefield Storey, The Conquest of the Philippines by the United States, p. 120.

¹⁴ Linn, pp. 152-156.

¹⁵ Sexton, p. 273

¹⁶ Storey, p. 142

¹⁷ Joint Pub 3-07, P. II-4.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. II-5.

¹⁹ Garel A. Grunder, The Philippines and the United States, p. 53.

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